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Salmi, Charlotta

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Reading Footnotes: Joe Sacco and the Graphic Human Rights Narrative

Author:

Dr. Charlotta Salmi,
British Academy Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Department of English Literature
University of Birmingham

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Keywords

Palestine; Graphic novel; Joe Sacco; Human; Frame; History

Apache helicopters are scanning the night sky. Their angular frames are barely discernible as they search a crowded cityscape for insurgents or terrorists, signs of life. If you look closer a flicker of movement is visible between the blinds of a flat below: a group of men in the dark, trying not to be seen, hoping to be spared their lives. This scene is so commonplace that it could be depicting any number of twenty-first century conflict zones – Baghdad, Kabul, or Tripoli – all sites of urban apache warfare where heavily armed forces have tried to defend, or defend against, a civilian population. In this instance, it figures in the introductory sequences of Maltese-American comics artist or journalist Joe Sacco's recent work, *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009), and there not as an emblem of contemporary conflict, but of the conflicted discourse of history. The cityscape is Gaza City, "much bloodied and aching poor", which according to Sacco "burns in a tighter circle of hell than almost any other part of Palestine" (2009, 9), and the relentless movement of the Israeli military helicopters symbolizes a historiography that has pushed dispossessed people to its margins. In Sacco's self-critical text, such portrayals of the ways in which narratives obscure human suffering are commonplace. In exposing these instances, *Footnotes in Gaza* is concerned with developing a narrative form that could render visible Palestinian subjects as, precisely, humans, caught in a conflict with real human costs.

Sacco compares, for example, the relative interest in the death of the American activist Rachel Corrie (who was crushed by an Israeli bulldozer in 2003) with that of a Palestinian man, Ahmed el-Najjar, shot by the Israeli Defence Forces on the same day; in international media, he laments, only one of these lives is grievable – what Judith Butler argues is a measure of human worth. Lives cannot be apprehended as lost if they are not apprehended as lives first, Butler argues, and grief therefore becomes an indicator of what a society or culture recognizes as a valuable human life (2009, 1). Some lives, named and photographed, are given weight through obituaries and articles (as happened with Corrie, an unknown activist who soon became iconic after her death), while others are turned into impersonal numbers, buried in statistics. In response to these *frames of war* that Judith Butler (2009) argues determine how audiences view not only specific conflicts, but the lives they claim, Sacco both constructs alternative modes of representation and dismantles them in a continual process of experimenting with human rights writing in comics form. I argue that his framing and re-framing of Palestinians and their history serves to introduce a different practice of representing and reading humanity in conflict. The comic pushes audiences to read beyond what we are trained to recognize, to read *for* the human as a prerequisite for acknowledging their rights.

On first glance *Footnotes in Gaza* takes the form of a counter-history. It tells of two events that have been obscured by Israeli historiography and contemporary media: the incidents in 1956 that led to multiple civilian deaths in the Gaza towns of Khan Younis and Rafah. Sacco was spurred to uncover these "footnotes to the sideshow of a forgotten war" (2009, 8) when their mention was omitted from the collaborative piece he produced with Chris Hedges for *Harper's* magazine in 2001. While the book is presented as a historical intervention, however, it follows closely the conventions that Ron Dudai outlines for the human rights report: it combines factual analysis with individual testimonies, presents carefully footnoted evidence alongside emotional witness accounts (2006, 791). As such, while the book starts as a project of investigative journalism, reporting is soon depicted as banal reiteration: ringing cell phones and journalists' questions

create symmetrical patterns across the pages – “A week ago! A month ago! A year ago!” (2009, 5) Sacco comments cynically; it all looks and reads the same. Sacco ends up framing his work instead as a response to an Israeli foreign ministry report from 1949 that argued that the Palestinian choice is either to adapt or die – after the establishment of the Israeli state, the document proposes, the Palestinian population must assimilate into the surrounding Arab nations or turn into “human debris” (36)ⁱ.

If conflict continues unabated because, as Sacco suggests, jaded writers present events to international audiences as such war games with low stakes – Palestinian deaths are marginal at best, no more than footnotes to other states’ narratives – Sacco uses his comic to paint a detailed picture, visually and textually, of the process by which people are decimated into epistemic rubble. Through a graphic narrative that starts with the events of the 1956 Suez War, then gravitates to the less well-documented sideshow – the border clashes between the Egyptian-controlled Gaza strip and Israel – and leaps from there to the atrocities committed by Israeli forces on civilians, Sacco turns the footnote from a chronological appendage to an epistemological category in its own right. These footnotes from Gaza become narratological metaphors for subalternity. Despite the meticulous reconstruction of the forgotten brutalities that took place in Gaza in 1956, the real focus of Sacco’s work, therefore, is not the summary executions of men dragged out of their homes and shot in front of their families in Khan Younis, nor the beatings of unarmed civilians in the large screening operation in Rafah, but the discursive destruction of their humanity that slowly robbed refugees of access to their land and history. Read in this light, *Footnotes in Gaza* is a pertinent example of an emerging form of graphic human rights writing.

i. A patchy history

As the apache image indicates – modern history in Sacco’s opinion is not unlike the fighter pilot who can kill with a turn of his head – it too views subjects through ruthless epistemological frames that judge some lives to be legitimate citizen subjects and doom others to obscurity. In this sense, Sacco is aligned with postcolonial theorists like the Subaltern Studies school of scholars, who argue that world history has not only favoured the state, which “creates history, the subject matter and the prose of history” according to Gyanendra Pandey (2006, 2), but has excluded those without a state from its representational framework.ⁱⁱ Sacco’s use of the term footnotes, for example, emphasizes how violence feeds into and stems from history in a cyclical process. Lives that are deemed footnotes are dispensable to the state that creates history; any violence committed against them is worthy of no greater note than an addendum to the annals. In the Palestinian-Israeli conflict in particular, narrative omission can serve as a form of annihilation. History performs what post-Zionist historian Avi Shlaim (2009, xiii) terms *politicide* – the denial of an independent political existence for Palestinians in Palestine – through an act of *memoricide*: a conscious attempt to “tell one narrative and erase another” (2006, 234) that Ilan Pappé traces in Israeli culture.

Under such circumstances, images can offer a potential history that, as Israeli visual theorist Ariella Azoulay (2013) suggests, not only fosters different understandings of the community and its culture, but opens up new avenues for intervention into the past. Such a history “exposes past

potential, and the potential created by that exposure” (565) through visual archives that create the conditions for a renewed understanding of the nation and citizenship. Mixed cultural and critical interventions like Sacco’s are therefore not just academically useful, but politically productive. They can, like Sacco shows us, use the process of comics reading and interpretation to question how we delimit the state and its citizens, humanity and its others. *Footnotes in Gaza* explores how the formal conventions that narratives rely on, and the ways of reading they invite, are closely aligned with discourses that determine what is recognizable as legitimate subjects of narrative.

Sacco is not alone in depicting a Palestinian visual history as a claim for human rights, but he is perhaps the most famous popular writer to do so. Although the Palestinian cartoonist Naji al-Ali’s satirical works are much loved globally, and Edward Said famously collaborated with photographer Jean Mohr to create a photo book titled after a line by the late Mahmoud Darwish, “Where should the birds fly after the last sky?” (1984, 13) it is Sacco’s particular portrayals of the conflict that have gained the widest international readership. As Edward Said notes in a foreword to Sacco’s earlier work *Palestine* (2003), Sacco’s comics have a “power to detain us, to keep us from impatiently wondering off in order to follow a catch-phrase or a lamentably predictable narrative of triumph and fulfilment” (v). His straightforward drawing style and conversational tone are not only inherently accessible, they are also brutally honest about how the systems of representation that detain readers can keep them tied to both particular ways of reading and particular ideological perspectives.

While Sacco is concerned with accounting for Palestine, as Said notes, in “human terms”, he is therefore more sceptical of the possibility of doing so within the “narrative sequence[s] with which any reader can identify” (v). Sacco’s critics frequently focus on how the comic journalist’s simplistic self-portrayal turns him into a substitute for the universal, an avatar or cipher into which we can place ourselves; and Sacco, who bases his texts on interviews and first-hand accounts, does indeed take on the position of a witness.ⁱⁱⁱ He explains his research to his subjects via comparing himself to al-Ali – the cartoonist who is most famous for his character Hanthala: an aloof bystander who observes all the scenes he depicts (Al-Ali, 2009) – the reference, of course, lends political gravity to Sacco’s work, but, by association, it also enables Sacco to lay claim to a similar role as objective observer. This predominant focus on the figure of Sacco, even if only as a displaced conduit for ourselves has resulted in a critical practice that overlooks his engagement with both the epistemological and narrative frames that determine his own representations and their reception abroad.

Sacco is far more concerned with his own entanglement in the material he depicts, and the implications for how his audience may come to read or receive the stories he tells, than such readings give credit for. When Sacco leaves Gaza in a taxi with his friend and guide Abed at the end of the book, for example, we see the mingling crowds of the busy streets of Rafah through the black outline of the window frame, and as we zoom in on the chatting men, the women shopping and the children rushing to school, the frame disappears. We are left only with the dark profile of Sacco’s observing face. The sequence forewarns how our attention to Sacco comes at the cost of an awareness of the windows (and frames) onto the conflict that he both deploys and

portrays, and which, Sacco himself is aware, significantly affect how global audiences perceive the events he reports.

Footnotes in Gaza can therefore be read as a response to Butler's call for a visual culture that could "thematize the forcible frame" that "restricts what is perceivable" or recognizable as a human subject in history (2009, 100). As an outside observer, writing to a Western audience, he is both seeking to give voice to a forgotten history (its footnotes), to reconstruct and legitimize the position of the stateless within the chronicles of statehood *and*, at the same time, to critique the very frames that such narratives rely on: the categories that delimit what we see as human life and thereby recognize as a legitimate subject of history. This simultaneous constructing and dismantling of the "frames of recognition" (Butler 2009) through which narrative subjects are created, hinges in Sacco's narrative on the particular act of reading that comics artists and critics call "closure" (McCloud, 1993, 63; Whitlock, 2006, 968). Closure closes the circuit of meaning making between panels and pages, through leaps of imagination that develop the plot through the movement of time between frames. It is, as such, the process by which we assume a narrative whole from the visible parts, by determining not only what the frame contains, but what it excludes – what happens, so to say, 'off-stage', off the page or in the gutter.

To begin with Sacco manipulates this feature of comics representation to assist in a meticulous project of writing or constructing a history for the footnotes, the debris. The sheer number of metaphors relating to building in the first half of the text should alert us to the fact that Sacco is trying to present a convincing case for the existence of a Palestinian *state* history. This framing for his material, allows Sacco to present Palestinians as valid political subjects and thereby legitimize their claims. History is an edifice off which footnotes "dangle", it is a "tower of memories" with a clear architectural plan, it requires "digging" through the "layers" etc. Sacco's own account comes in neatly packaged "parts" (2009, 203) that rely on familiar academic frameworks to lend it credence. It shuns the "compassionate and emotional style" (Dudai 2006, 789) that human rights narratives in general appeal to, and which Sacco's previous book on Palestine demonstrated, and aims instead to present facts in a format which defining feature, Dudai argues, is "the extensive use of footnotes" (784). This type of account as Kay Schaeffer and Sidonie Smith suggest, aims to extend "human justice and dignity" by not just giving voice to the claims of silenced individuals, but inciting an audience to "take responsibility for the recognition of these claims" (2004, 5).

In keeping with methodological, historiographical approach of the human rights report, the talking heads or mug shots of the many interviewees that Sacco consulted for his project function as citations, identifiable individuals whose first-hand accounts of the events from 1956 are not only verifiable, but also function as mouthpieces for the community. As their narratives unfold in the background, their stories become *the* Palestinian story. Their claims, therefore, are presented through the framework of an existing state history. Sacco's panelling often places past and present events side by side: sites of mass-killings, such as the fort wall in Khan Younis where the hundred or so bodies of men and adolescent boys were lined up, are displayed both in the present moment and the past through parallel images that maintain a strict boundary between the two temporalities (2009, xvii). Space therefore becomes the subject that moves up and down

“historical empty time” (2006, 26) as a coherent unit – a communal or collective understanding of time that Benedict Anderson argued is an essential part of imagining nations into being.

As the self-proclaimed set designer and director, Sacco’s work however soon begins to show signs of discomfort with his historiographical approach and the implications for his audience ability to read the conflict in his account. In cultural contexts where conflicting parties adopt highly contentious and exclusive images or symbols to stand in for imaginary wholes – whether the previous or future homeland – forms of reading that encourage the reader to draw lines between a historical community and a present day political collective can become a way of foreclosing both the uncertain, unstable and fragmented nature of narrative, and other understandings of cultural identity and citizenship. Doubtless in the events Sacco portrays there are very real perpetrators and victims, and to a certain extent it is the elision of responsibility for past actions – and their future consequences – that Sacco is trying to address by bringing these footnotes to light. However, just as walls arise and are naturalized to create ‘new facts on the ground’ in the Israeli/Palestinian landscape, Sacco begins to question how the ‘closure’ of a state history might close down alternative modes of understanding the past and thereby restrict the potential for future coexistence.

Pakistani critic Ananya Kabir goes so far as to suggest that in order to break out of the default positions of blame and guilt that narrative modes of remembrance produce, studies of partition areas, such as Israel/Palestine, must engage with creative cultural modes that do not privilege order over open-endedness (2009, 490). Closure in literary criticism is perceived as the ‘end’ of the narrative, the return to stability that brings some form of gratification, fulfilment, or release to the reader. In effect, it is what gives meaning to what came before. This is why prose narratives, Kabir argues, become problematic in dealing with conflict, because “material is organized in order to produce the linear logic of cause and effect” (2009, 489), order is imposed in hindsight on confused or ambiguous events. The result is that interpretation can be guided towards “inherited prejudices that are easily mobilized as causalities” (490). The same argument can be applied to the counter-history or human rights report, as Sacco’s initial attempt to portray Palestinian experiences through received historiographical lenses shows.

His rigidly symmetrical layout, like the ‘structured’ state history that plots a community in time, confines him into showing either the victims lined up across the street (whose terrified faces we view straight on) or the perpetrators – pointing towards us with an array of artillery. There is no middle ground for the writer or the reader to occupy in such a history Sacco’s panels suggest, as the lines of conflict are demarcated between ‘us’ and ‘them’. As such, while Sacco initially acknowledges that closure, or the synthesis and movement between panels, can be an effective tool for drawing the reader to recognize Palestinian claims through a state history, he soon sees its risks in enforcing barriers between communities, like in the traditional meaning of closure: layering bricks and stones at the end of a wall. The double lens afforded by historiographical conventions of representation encourages a mutual closure of the past and present, where the frames of the past delimit the possibilities of the future. This is precisely why Sacco warns at the climax of his history, the narrative “wobbles and strains” (2009, 298).

As long as the book attempts to build or construct a narrative for the footnote in the terms that any reader can recognize, Sacco is conscious that it has to rely on the troublesome frames or categories that determine what constitutes a representative account or a legitimate testimony. As he sifts through some of the more problematic testimonies he has gathered with a clinical precision, outlining how one man in his sister-in-law's and nephew's versions was not present at the events he remembers in Khan Younis, and expressing his incredulity that another claims to have been shot in the head 36 times at close range and survived, he starts to question his own role in perpetuating different forms of violence or silencing. Sacco concedes to a man whose home has been destroyed, "it's rubble that's brought [him], too" (2009, 191), and although the rubble Sacco has come for is not the physical remains of the houses, but the self-perpetuating discourse of historical marginalia, it nonetheless stands between the historian and seeing his footnotes as suffering humans. Sacco ends up discarding some witness accounts, which, as a result, become silenced for a second time – first by an Israeli state history, and now also by Sacco's counter history. The supposed 'objective' omnipresent viewpoint that the report or history encourages therefore comes close to replicating the apache perspective that consolidates categorical boundaries between subjects and footnotes.

Following this mode of representation, Sacco's account not only comes close to becoming a violent discourse in its own right, but it closes down alternative pathways of understanding: as he ushers the reader along through present day Gaza and its historical events he deploys a tone reminiscent of a judicial prosecutor – "Dear reader we have arrived at another losing proposition" (2009, 63), the narrator informs us before introducing the memories of a fedayee, "You have just finished reading a string of personal recollections" (2009, 112) one section starts, while another ends with the promise "I swear I'll wrench nothing but the facts from our next batch of eyewitnesses" (2009, 119). While Sacco's reader is fully detained, that is to say prevented from pursuing alternative narrative pathways, they are not necessarily engaged by his material. Although footnotes in reports, as Dudai suggests, can "shield the argument" (2006, 791) and offer the kind of transparency that should make a case more refutable and therefore more convincing, such debate is "only feasible if you share the same paradigm" (793). Writing the stateless into a state history, framing the footnotes as recognizable human subjects through the use of footnotes, undoubtedly causes violence, but it is not guaranteed to mobilize support.

Relying on given frames – in this instance pre-set categories of authenticity and accuracy – can help to lend legitimacy to the Palestinian witnesses and their claims, but it can also be a hindrance when the chosen frames fail to elicit the desired sympathy from their audience. Sacco's earlier work *Palestine*, for example, was not an immediate success with its intended audience, precisely because its readers refused the forms of recognition that Sacco framed his narrative with. "Most American journalists agreed with my position on Bosnia and it was incredibly warmly received", Sacco commented to Rachel Cooke on his Eisner award-winning work, *Safe Area Goražde* (2000), but they did not, by implication, agree with Sacco's perspective on Palestine. Sacco explains that it was only after the success of this later work that *Palestine*, which had originally been published in comic form in 1993, received enough attention to be turned into a collected work almost a decade later (Cooke, 2009). The comic series, like the subsequent book, portrayed Sacco's own position on the conflict, but it failed to shift what

Butler terms the frames of recognition of those who did not consider the Palestinian lives he depicted as grievable human lives, let alone valid political subjects.

Sacco's text thus dismisses the counter-history or the human rights report as effective means of rendering Palestinian suffering more visible to the reader. If anything, *Footnotes in Gaza* shows how certain, more linear narrative modes can place the reader in the same position as the Palestinian men in the screenings Sacco depicts. They are subjected to preconceived frames, like the Palestinian subjects, set-up as Butler puns (2009, 8). Sacco's angles and frames often place the reader/observer, uncomfortably, amidst the violence being recounted, staring into the scope of a gun at the innocent surrendering men in Khan Younis, left to wonder if it was they who pulled the trigger as they encounter their bullet-ridden bodies in the next panel. While this can, of course, be an effective method of shocking an audience into concern, the power to detain that Said hailed in his foreword to *Palestine*, of restraining the viewer in certain narrative paths, also risks becoming a way of stopping both the reader and the Palestinian subject in their respective positions, holding them accountable to given frames of narrative and empathy, without any leeway to create new ways for understanding.

Legitimizing Palestinian claims through Sacco's initial state history is therefore at odds with accounting for the conflict in 'human terms'. Even a history that attempts to reclaim and recuperate, forces it subjects to relive past atrocities in potentially traumatic ways. In the closing sequences of the book as his car departs down the street in Rafah, it turns into the army vehicle which arrived in 1956 to announce the screening of the men in the town; Sacco notes, "How often we forced the old men of Rafah back down this road lined with soldiers and strewn with shoes. How often we shoved the old men between the soldiers with sticks and through that gate" into the school yard (2009, 383). "In the end, when we'd finished with them", he comments, "we let them break down the wall and run home" (2009, 383). By invoking the wall that held the Palestinian men captive in 1956, and the moment of liberation, the scene when hundreds of bodies clamber over the dust and bricks to escape the horrors they have witnessed, Sacco registers not only that the historian doubles as perpetrator, but that Palestinian men (and women) are only truly free of their ordeal when they can break out of others' discourse, Sacco's own included.

ii. Human to Human

It is not surprising then that as the text reaches its historical climax Sacco starts to dismantle his representational framework. Grids dissolve into full page spreads, and his reconstructed history gives way to the events unfolding at the time of his research: the demolition of streets and houses. "While we feverishly dig away at 1956, daily events are shovelled back at us, obscuring our finds" (2009, 282), Sacco writes; in fact, they erode his narrative structure, force it to crumble. As Sacco climbs over yet another "lip of debris" (180) to reach a stark landscape of rubble, we are reminded of not only the physical removal of life from the landscape, but the destruction of historical subjectivity that defines what Shlaim terms the *politicide* of Palestinian community. The entire panelling is gone and all we have is Sacco's subtle pen strokes to guide us as we dig to find any trace of human settlement in the white swathes of the page. These narrative digressions, where the present tears into Sacco's history, thus dissemble his carefully staged

reconstructions: snippets of disjointed testimony rise to the surface. Sacco recounts how one old woman clutched at straws trying to hang on to some narrative coherence in an interview:

She tells us about Egyptian soldiers killed in the schoolyard, but her daughter-in-law interjects.

‘She’s talking about 1967.’

[The old woman says] ‘The Egyptian army came to defend Palestine.’

Her grandson tries to keep her focused.

‘We’re talking about ’56.’

‘After they killed them they left them.’ [the old woman continues]

Her tower of memories has collapsed. She gropes around to offer us a piece of her rubble.

‘He was shot in the head.’

Hunh? (2009, 200)

The historical structure is gone, there’s no closure nor narrative coherence to this woman’s account as we, like the woman herself, are left with the rubble.

The woman’s trauma, while a stumbling block to the historian’s work, offers Sacco an insight into the individual experience of violence. For all the frustrations for the impatient interviewer, Sacco soon realizes that such breakdowns in memory demonstrate the present experience of human suffering. The repetitions and regressions in her, and many other elderly Palestinians’ testimonies may not offer evidence of historical atrocity, but they do bear witness to the cyclicity of violence in conflict. Instead of placing these interviewees (like his other witnesses) as talking heads over historical scenes that unfold in the background, mouthpieces for the community, Sacco’s panels therefore begin to focus on their haggard faces and tired eyes, staging the encounter, as he writes, “human to human” (2009, 191). These slippery fragments of history that refuse to align neatly, finally push him to embrace the failure of narrative not as historical incongruity, but as a sign of his subjects’ humanity.

In the wake of the bulldozers Sacco begins to dwell on the mundane experiences of the men he meets among the rubble of present day Gaza. He depicts the Palestinian fighter Khaled, for example, resting in Abed’s bed in nine successive panels that focus in on his face. The kaleidoscopic portrait not only stresses how no single frame can do justice to the complexity of the subject, but the droopy eyelids of the wary guerrilla tell of a human rather than political plight: the exhaustion, impatience and dreams that arise in the limbo of uncertainty – dreams of escaping to Syria or Switzerland, of moving to Sweden and raising his children in peace. “I expect to be killed, I expect to be assassinated”, Khaled sighs in between resting his eyes, “but now it is taking too long” (2009, 178). Here Sacco’s emphasis on the wanted man as father and husband not only serves to shift the focus from the political or communal position of the fighter (claimed as terrorist or martyr) to a universal human frailty in facing death, but lends, as Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith argue that the most effective human rights narratives do, a “human face to suffering” (2004, 3).

As a narrative strategy this is not only a far cry from the sociological prison interviews and hospital visits that comprise the vignettes in *Palestine*, where Sacco portrayed Palestinians’ lives and dreams through the prism of their cause, it is also a move away from the linear prose style of

the human rights report or the alternative state history with which he started his text. Sacco writes that the act of pouring history into a vessel, of giving it some kind of ordered shape like a linear narrative, might result in the spillage of some truth along the way – and Sacco’s account shows that it clearly does spill. His interviewees “overflow” with history, history that he can’t “sop” up, which runs over his pages as footnotes, like panels, bleed; history can no longer be constructed in distinct building blocks as the present and the past become entangled, “part of a remorseless continuum, a historical blur” (2009, xvii). Sacco therefore resurrects the footnote as fragment rather than narrative appendage as a way of resisting the kind of narrative closure that both frames conflict in neat binaries of blame and guilt, as Kabir argues, and encloses historical legitimacy within states, as many postcolonial historians have implied.

In practice, a focus on fragments over the closure of prose, symbols over citations, suggests that narratives of traumatic histories, which struggle to turn events into chronologies, in some circumstances benefit from a lack of linearity. While this lack, to a certain extent, prevents atrocities from being laid to rest, leaving open a raw wound for the victims – one which in their own accounts may very well demand that their trauma is ordered and made sense of, to be healed – in third party narratives, imposing a chronology from the outside runs the risk of forcing such narratives into pre-conceived frameworks of what constitutes a legitimate narrating subject. Such frameworks not only rely on, but can perpetuate the frames of war that pushed disposed people into the margins in the first place. Standing in the ruins of Gaza’s demolished streets and houses, amid the rubble of his historiographical narrative, Sacco therefore suggests that to relocate the human in the ‘debris’, the reporter and the historian has to shift towards alternative, non-linear, non-prose methods of signification and representation.

Consequently, in the final sequence of the text Sacco opts for a form of representation that is neither historiography, nor human rights report, but which immerses the reader in a fictionalized narrative. In a series of panels on a black background he makes the reader live through the scenes of fear and abuse as one of the men, a victim in the surrendering crowd, holding their hands in the air, while stepping over fallen bodies towards the oncoming blows. The reader is no longer judge and jury, operating within the frameworks of historical evidence and legitimate testimony, but experiencing fear, clutching to the fragment, the debris. As such, if Sacco has detained us or arrested us, as Said claims, then ultimately he offers no release: the text fails to close in a way that gives the reader pleasure or relief, and thereby it avoids foreclosing the narrative into cause and effect/blame and guilt. The final black panels therefore break, not only with the narrative mode of the rest of the text, but with the established relationship between Sacco and his reader. Without text boxes, these silent images of the book become sensory experiences, loosely connected fragments of potential memory that force us to acknowledge, if not fully recognize, the lives he depicts as not only ‘debris’, structured by others, broken apart by states and historians, but also as human.

The silent images have the same effect as Israeli filmmaker Ari Folman’s much-lauded graphic documentary *Waltz with Bashir* (2008). Folman’s film, which revisits his own traumatic memories (and relapses) of the Sabra and Shatila massacres in Beirut in 1982, ends with real video footage of the piles of corpses strewn around the streets of the Palestinian refugee camps. The viewer is dislodged from the alternative frames they have been viewing the film through – a graphic

documentary narrative – and become complicit witnesses, feeling Folman’s trauma first-hand, rather than following its exposition from a distance. Sacco likewise confronts cultural blind spots by creating the conditions of painful viewing. If Marianne Hirsch argues that images can turn viewers into collateral damage, experiencing trauma affectively and viscerally (2004, 1211), Sacco turns the reader from a potential perpetrator (enabling by condoning, condoning by spectating) into a hypothetical victim, potentially a part of the scenes and events that it portrays. The terrified faces of the men and women around us, the shouting soldiers, and finally the club coming towards our eyes are framed as experiences that could one day become ours.

Sacco plays with the idea of reading conflict through collaboration: not in the sense of the betrayal of political sides, but collaboration as the practice of meaning making in comics where the reader and writer are equally responsible for deciding what occurs between the frames of panels. These final panels form non-sequiturs – freestanding images – that not only replicate the ruptures of trauma, but also what Butler terms apprehension, an alternative mode of perception. They exist and operate prior to full cognition, the process of closure in the text. Apprehensive and apprehending, we seize upon the events, without being able to structure them. We understand only that they interrelate through their shared view point: ours. Sacco’s sequence, as such, takes Folman’s video footage even further. It not only channels the guilt of spectatorship, of what we make visible – Folman fired the flares that lit the way for the phalangist militia who perpetrated the massacre – or what we help to turn invisible, like the violence committed against stateless peoples, but invites us to move past the frames that determine what we recognize at all. The narrative can therefore move away from a discourse of recognition, a process of ordering that forces us to delimit the human, the grievable life, which, as Butler points out, by definition posits something outside of its own categorical boundary, outside of its frames (2009, 5).

If Sacco portrays the historian or reporter as an agent who, like the military men he depicts, arrives on the scene, processes the men (or their narratives) and drives off in the dust, Sacco the comics artist on the other hand can incite a different mode of reading. Sacco aimed to “throw” the Western reader at alternative depictions of Palestinians – their celebrations and their fears, their joys and their despair – as he states to Laila El-Haddad in an interview and it is only by manipulating the position of the reader rather than the material (which, as we saw with *Palestine*, fails to travel without a receptive audience), that he eventually brings into fruition a more productive way of engaging his audience in his subject. At the climax of the school screenings in Rafah, where identified Palestinian soldiers are forced to point out their colleagues among the men being screened, for example, one fearful man points straight at us, identifying the reader as another informant or a fellow Palestinian resistance fighter. The ill-omened gesture is ambiguous, given up to the military authorities we don’t know whether we are identified as friend or foe, but the effect is the same: we, the accused reader/observers, are no longer the jury, the objective observers and assessors of events, but irreversibly implicated in what we see. We become collaborators.

While collaboration as a term is associated in the present day with betrayal, the bartering of fellow lives for personal gain, Azoulay (2013) makes a case through her photographic history of “civil alliances” in 1947-50, for reclaiming the term for lives that were truly collaborative, altruistically cooperative for the sake of everyone’s benefit. She argues that images can contribute

to such a potential history that not only renders visible victims of disaster (she was looking at the *nakbah*) and thereby makes the Israeli viewer recognize their own disaster – of becoming perpetrators – but also reveals moments in history where other options could have been chosen (550). Sacco's images build toward a similar potential in history, they insert choice in the constant reiteration of history as division – the closure that separates them from us – by halting the process of memocide or politicide through alternative modes of signification.

Sacco's footnotes cannot reconstruct the houses of Gaza nor recover the lives disrupted by death and injury, but they do open up a way of reading the rubble that allows us to salvage the human debris. As Sacco strolls through the night time streets of Gaza towards the end of his historical puzzle, the reader is brought down from the view point of the apache helicopters to the ground level experience of the inhabitants of Rafah, navigating the politically-fraught rubble of the conflict. In the text a two-page spread of the 1956 Palestinians gathering their dead under the cloak of darkness is followed by a sequence of Sacco and his friends being fired upon in the night in contemporary Gaza. "We are Fuad and Ashraf and Abed and I", Sacco reflects, "But to a soldier with night-vision equipment a kilometre away we are shapes in the dark in the border area" (2009, 366).

It is Sacco's aim to reverse the process by which humans become faceless targets in the murky border areas, not only pushed to the margins by violent expressions of statehood, but erased by international representations of conflict, and it is the mixed visual, as well as textual, media of the comic that allows him to challenge the many frames of war that define contemporary historiography and media. In carrying out this deconstruction, rather than construction, of systems of representation the graphic narrative fully comes into its own as a postcolonial form. The rich possibilities of the medium lie not in its capacity to call up witnesses, through talking heads style documentary reportage, nor in its detailed rendition of past scenes, which define Sacco's narrative style in the beginning of the text, but in its ability to position its reader both within the frame and outside of it, responsible for distinguishing its limitations. The final sequence could be the recollections of a particular witness, more likely it is an amalgamation of the experiences of many, but whether we can recognize the assumed individual or collectivity behind the narrative is not important: it is because such closure is indefinitely suspended that the faces we skim over, unidentifiable by us, take on a human shape in the dark.

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ⁱ Sacco is citing a report from Tom Segev's book *The First Israelis* which predicted that "the most adaptable and best survivors would manage by a process of natural selection, and the others will

waste away. Some will die but most will turn into human debris and social outcasts and probably join the poorest classes in the Arab countries” (2009, 36).

ⁱⁱ See, also, Ranajit Guha, 2002, *History at the Limit of World-History* (New York: Columbia University Press).

ⁱⁱⁱ Rocco Versaci argues that the “cartoonish style” (2007, 119) Sacco draws himself in suggests an alienation from his surroundings, Wendy Kozol (2012, 167) sees his blank glasses as indicative of his status as an avatar and Sacco tells Rachel Cooke that “some people have told me that hiding my eyes makes it easier for them to put themselves in my shoes, so I’ve kind of stuck with it. I’m a nondescript figure; on some level, I’m a cipher” (n.p).